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Changing dimensions of reference service in public libraries

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Planning where you are going is easier when you have a sense of where you are and where you have been. The following reflections are a snapshot in time, the observations of one person, with input from colleagues with whom he works closely.

For the better part of a century, the reference desk at a public library has looked the same – with the addition of a telephone some decades ago and a

computer during the last decade. The public library's reference librarian, however, has been asked to change in many more ways. Where this will go or whether reference librarians will become jacks-of-more-trades is impossible to say, but all involved in reference work in public libraries sense that yet more change is in store.

For many years, public libraries needed only one librarian to fill all roles,

especially as advisor to voracious readers and provider of answers to more difficult questions. In larger libraries, reader's advisory services and reference services became specialties. In some smaller ones, either the advisory or the reference function took precedence, or one was served better than the other. Providing both these services effectively, efficiently, and expeditiously has become more difficult. One reason is that the reference librarian has taken on new roles.

We continue to field questions in person and by telephone. We continue to have a "ready reference" collection of books most used to answer queries, with a larger reference collection — and the whole library — as a backup. We continue to maintain query files of useful or hard-to-find information, often augmented by a file drawer of similar information, tailored to current local needs. We probably have a community organization file hovering nearby, and we continue to have local government materials at hand. Some public libraries have even established their own databases to serve these local and current needs.

We now also receive queries from our patrons via e-mail and fax. Neither of these means affords the librarian an opportunity to conduct a satisfactory reference interview in a timely manner. Since patrons can get questions to us faster, are we to think that they want the answers more quickly? (At the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, we will respond via e-mail but will only fax information to another library. Part of the rationale for this decision is that some patrons circumvent the costs of making photocopies themselves.) Ultimately, the volume of questions and the reference librarian's knowledge of

resources determine whether an answer can be "instantaneous." The precedent of the in-person inquiry was set when telephones arrived on the reference desk and will probably always remain the norm, unless a library can afford to staff telephone/fax/e-mail services separately.

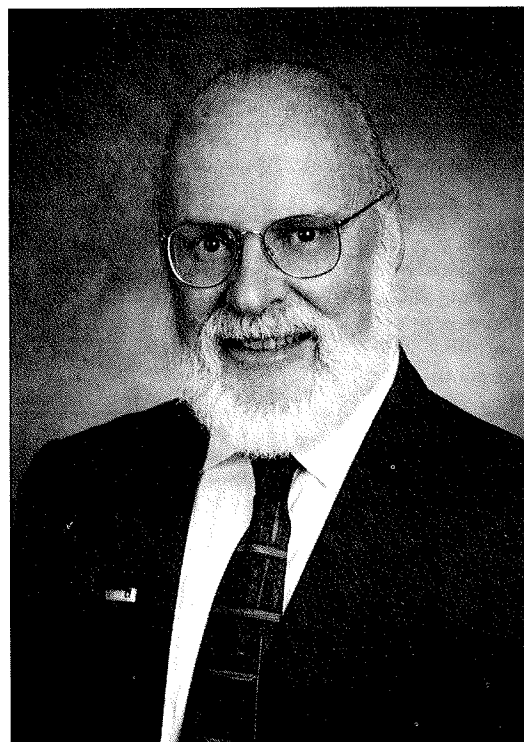
Electronic resources sometimes allow us to answer a question more quickly. But knowing in which particular reference book to look is often the fastest way of getting a piece of information. While many electronic resources are keyword searchable, we may have to wade through more information than needed to find a single fact! The speed with which a question can be answered is still very dependent on the individual librarian's knowledge of which resource(s) to use, appropriate terminology, a logical progression in searching resources, and the willingness of reference librarians to work together as a team, knowing that someone else may have the key to finding the answer.

Patrons expect librarians to stay abreast of new information in order to find the answers to their more difficult questions. But this has been something that librarians have dealt with for decades—the information explosion. The real change for librarians

Changing Dimensions of Reference Service in Public Libraries

by Walter Frankel

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Walter A. Frankel has been a librarian for 35 years. He has worked in academic, school, and public libraries, in positions ranging from rare books to acquisitions, from branch head to director. He offers these reflections from his current position as a reference librarian at Corvallis-Benton County Public Library. He looks forward to retiring in the near future!

has been not what electronic resources are doing for us, but what they are doing to us and to the services we offer.

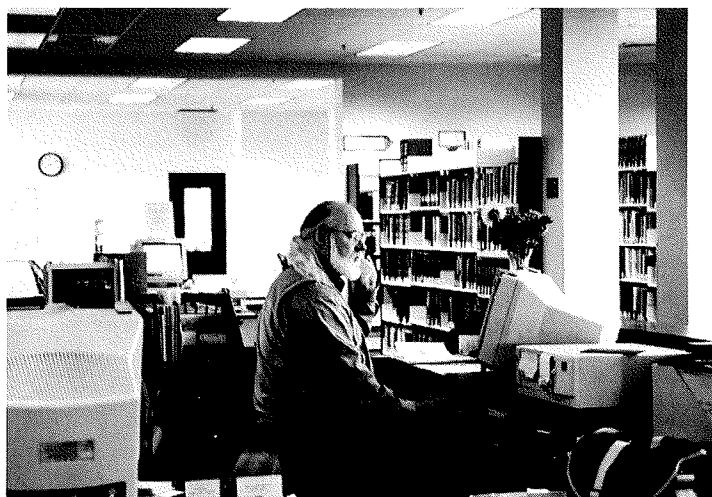
PROVIDING INFORMATION

Some patrons cannot or will not use a computer—but there have always been patrons who were baffled by the card catalog and refused to use it, too! Even as the public becomes more accustomed to using electronic resources in the library, some patrons will always be uncomfortable without the mediation of the reference librarian. Perhaps we should be grateful that we will always have the chance to conduct a satisfactory reference interview with these people.

When patrons search electronic databases, we are generally unaware of what information they may be seeking. Because frequently no reference interview precedes this use, we cannot usually determine whether the patron has found the information sought, has been overwhelmed by too much information, could have found the information more quickly in a traditional resource, or has simply given up. The usual tag to reference assistance is, "Be sure to come back if you don't find what you need." But unlike the retail clerk who is able to ask, "Did you find everything you need?" libraries do not have the luxury of staffing exits to ask that question. This same question will be even more difficult to answer as we make more information available to patrons at home or in their workplace. Similarly, if the reference librarian starts a patron on a database search, there may never be an opportunity to follow-up on the results. The occasion to ask about the suitability of the materials or to evaluate the reliability of the information may never arise. Determining whether the reference interview and question were satisfactorily completed is becoming more difficult.

Clearly, the reference interview has become more difficult when factoring in the patron's use of electronic databases prior to posing the question to a reference librarian. We have often had patrons tell us what book they used before coming to us—or have determined this through the interview. We are now being told, "I couldn't find anything on the Internet." This is not particularly helpful; when pressed to identify which search engine was used or what descriptors or what logical parameters were involved in the search, the patron more than likely is unable to tell us.

Many patrons apparently start a search with the Internet—because "You can find anything!"—not realizing they will likely find an overwhelming amount of information or that they could have found the answer more readily in a printed resource. More often than not, patrons do not understand that Net-Search opens one of several search engines, each of which has its own protocol, as well as its own strengths and weaknesses. If the librarian chooses to follow the patron's Internet search to seek an answer, the search will likely be repeated from scratch.



A peaceful moment at the reference desk.

PROVIDING ASSISTANCE

In the past, few patrons brought a book to the reference librarian and asked to be taught how to read, although some patrons asked how to use a particular resource. Making electronic resources such as e-mail and word-processing directly available to patrons has probably brought about the most significant changes in reference work. Unless a library has chosen to have a computer lab served by a single staff member, all questions on the use of these resources come to the reference desk. The majority are not informational, but instructional or technical. This is the new dimension in our reference work. The reference librarian is a teacher in a fashion that has rarely existed before in the public library (although the teaching function has always been a standard in school and academic library service). So the reference librarian has taken on a larger teaching role. We are offering classes in how to use the Internet, how to use specific databases, and how to use the catalog. Our "students" range from relatively sophisticated users looking for tips on how to work more efficiently to new users who don't know the first thing about a computer. We see people who have never used a keyboard or mouse. The Corvallis-Benton County Public Library has taken a page from academia and now lists "mouse experience" as required or preferred for some classes.

With patrons using diverse programs, how-to questions range from opening/closing a program to downloading or saving a file to performing sophisticated manipulations of data in spreadsheets and word processing. With dial-in access to some databases, patrons phone the reference desk expecting the librarian to help them use their home or work computer to access library services. Since patrons frequently know no more about their own operating

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access to. Others, like Worldcat, we've grown to rely on and would probably purchase on our own.

As a PORTALS member, we can participate in the ORBIS consortia and take advantage of any discounts vendors provide to large groups. But because of the nature of ORBIS—each library decides whether or not to purchase each database—beginning a service can take a much longer time than if we were to subscribe on our own. On the other hand, we benefit from all the work an ORBIS member does by tracking down a vendor, setting up trials, following up on price quotes, and coordinating the purchase by multiple libraries.

SUMMARY

In this article I've tried to highlight the issues involved in selecting and integrating electronic

resources here at the MCL. It seems clear that just as we get a handle on one aspect of this process another pops up. We try to remain flexible and find new ways to streamline the process of purchasing and installing products. As our technology base increases throughout our system, we'll need to closely examine the role of electronic and print reference in our branches and provide a suite of resources to support that role. Finally, we need to examine whether to continue centralizing the selection of electronic resources or distribute that responsibility to multiple selectors. **Q**

*Multnomah County Library Web site:
www.multnomah.lib.or.us/lib/*

Changing Dimensions

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systems than the librarian who has not seen or used it, the chances for perceived "bad service" are real.

At the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, we have tried developing a baseline of knowledge in each program available to patrons, for which every reference librarian is responsible. This has been necessary for two reasons: First, it will prevent (to some degree) inequity of service in assisting patrons. On the other side of this coin, a reference librarian can also feel comfortable in saying, "I am unable to help you with this; please try a help screen or refer to a book." Second, it becomes a basis for expectations of candidates seeking reference positions. The baseline first deals with hardware troubleshooting, all the "tricks" of checking connections and rebooting that one tries before contacting computer support personnel. The remainder addresses levels of proficiency in the software programs offered to the public. These will at least get a patron started and through the simpler tasks that can be performed with each program.

The public relations aspect of reference service remains vitally important for the future of our libraries. Only the satisfied patron/taxpayer will lobby to continue support of services at the levels at which their needs have been met. Measuring this satisfaction may be elusive. It is, however, to our advantage to take on the added instructional and assistance queries regarding electronic resources. Making electronic resources available only to those

who know how to use them goes against the grain of what public libraries in our country have long stood for: access for all. Denial of this teaching role may quickly diminish the support necessary to upgrade hardware and software in the future. Assisting patrons as their needs require assures that these resources — and resources of the future — will continue to be available for our work, as well as for public use.

The measures and standards for traditional public library service appear to be failing us at this time, and new ones should be worked out for some of the situations this article refers to. With electronic resources, we must take into account that not all "transactions" will be informational. The old dichotomy of informational and directional should be supplemented with instructional. Reference (informational) statistics may drop, but the reference librarian may be busier than ever assisting people in using the electronic resources.

In another generation, as more library patrons are comfortable with computers because they have used them in school, at work, and probably at home, the need for the instructional/technical assistance that reference librarians must now give may decrease. By that time information storage, retrieval, and delivery, will have changed further, as will have expectations from our public. Again, reference librarians will find their role changing, as we find it changing now. **Q**